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ABSTRACT

Preparatory to developing a curriculum for parents to use in teaching children how to evaluate the reality and applicability of television in their lives, interviews were held with 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds and adult whites, blacks, and Puerto Ricans around Boston to determine the processes they used to make such discrimination. The methodology of the interview is described, and representative answers from various respondents given. The coding methods and cross-checking systems are explained. Preliminary analysis of the responses is given, and contrasts between adult and 13-year-old responses are listed. Plans for future questioning of children, aged 4, 8, and 12, are described, along with plans for developing the proposed curriculum. (SK)

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WHEN PEOPLE THINK TELEVISION IS A WINDOW ON THEIR WORLD

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I'd like to begin today by relating to you some of the comments we have heard as we have talked about television with black, white, and Puerto Rican adolescents and adults in and around Boston. Let's start with one person who told us that considerably less than 30% of entertainment programming was true-to-life or worth knowing. In explaining why it was so low, he answered:

> Basically it's the attitude of the people in charge of the media. I think they just want to get large audiences. They feel that just a small percentage of people are interested in more serious, factual, true-to-life, whatever you want to call it. They're just not interested in that. They just want audiences. The other thing is if it's going to be a national program as opposed to a local program, they have to cater to even larger audiences. There again it would create even more mediocre programming.

Another interviewee, however, had a very different understanding of the reality of television. He thought that nearly 70% of entertainment programming was true-to-life or worth knowing, because:

> you know, I think television is pretty true-to-life and it's just you go home and watch the same things that you know about that go on in life. So without it you're not really missing much.

These people had general opinions about how much of entertainment television is true-to-life or worth knowing. People also have opinions about particular content areas. For example, one white woman told us:

> I don't know much about it, but it seems that all the black shows are all the same. It seems that they're showing all the black people in one way on almost all the shows, so maybe this is true.... I think the white

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> people are true-to-life and the black people must be true-to-life. I don't know much about them, but all the shows show them and have them act the same way. But as far as the white people, I know they try to make them true-to-life so people can sympathize with them.

A black man had a very different opinion about the ways in which black men are portrayed on television. He said:

> You sure hit a sore spot now. I think it's absolutely terrible. And one show in particular is Good Times. I think his portrayal is terrible. I think it's just a downgrade for the black man. It depicts him as not being overly ambitious. He comes on, he doesn't come on in a manly way, to me. He comes on sort of like a gorilla, and I think this is what white people expect black men to be, like gorillas.

This contrasts sharply with the opinions of the white woman we talked to and with the black man's own estimate of the portrayals of white women. He said:

> I'd say pretty good...you know, they're sort of flighty. I'd say it's a very good portrayal.

Comments like these appear often in interviews Sherryl Graves, Neal Gordon, and I have been conducting during the past nine months. These interviews are the first in a series of steps leading to a curriculum for parents to use in teaching their children how to evaluate the reality and applicability of television to their own lives. Television presents children with much antisocial behavior, stereotyped portrayals of women and minorities, and exhortations to purchase products. This content can affect the behavior, attitudes, and expectations of children. We believe that children may be able to modify the effects of exposure to some of this content by becoming more critical consumers of it and that parents can help them to do this. Thus we have embarked on three years of work to test this belief. Our objectives have been:

1. To discover the processes children use, or could be taught to use, to discriminate the applicability to their own lives of varieties of television content.

2. To develop techniques which allow parents to teach their young children to use the processes identified in the first objective.

3. To demonstrate that children who have been taught these processes will use them to discriminate which television content is applicable to their lives, resulting in changes in the extent to which television content influences them.

Today I will discuss preliminary findings from the phase of the research in which we attempt to discover the processes adolescents and adults use to discriminate the applicability of television to their lives. To do so we have conducted 58 clinical interviews with thirteen-year-olds, sixteen-year-olds, and their parents. We attempt to gain as much information as possible about the ways in which people decide what on television is true or applicable to their lives. This information will be used to shape our interviews with four-, eight-, and twelve-year-olds and to guide our choice of critical evaluation skills we will subsequently teach them.

As the selections you just heard indicate, we interview white, black, and Puerto Rican residents of communities in and around Boston. In so far as possible we have tried to work in communities in which all three ethnic groups reside. When that has not been possible we have, first, looked for communities in which at least two of these groups reside and have, second, attempted to select representative samples of each group extending across the entire range of social classes. The interviews are conducted in the subjects' homes or in school buildings. Each person is interviewed by someone who belongs to the same ethnic group. The interview is conducted in Spanish if a PUerto Rican subject wishes. Each interview lasts about 45 minutes, is tape-recorded, translated if necessary, and then transcribed. The transcripts

are blocked into units which roughly correspond to paragraphs of content and then coded in a sentence by sentence analysis.

The interview was developed over a period of four months. During the summer we pilot-tested various interview formats and questions. Each was designed to give us as much information as possible about how adolescents and adults decide what, of all the content they see on television, they will believe and/or consider applicable to their own lives. At the end of the summer we conducted another series of interviews, carried out preliminary coding on them, and revised the interview for a final time. In November we began to use this interview for data collection. Let me give you a few examples of the kinds of questions we ask. We begin by defining entertainment television and asking "So, in general, what do you think of entertainment television?" Answers, of course, vary from such statements as "no comment" to "I think it's good. If you don't have nothing to do, you can always go and watch TV" to long dissertations about what's good and bad on television.

There follows a whole series of questions designed to elicit information about how people decide what is true-to-life or worth knowing on television. For example:

> How true-to-life do you think entertainment television is in general?
> Why do you say that?
>
> Have you ever found yourself doing or believing something and realized you got it from watching entertainment television?
> What do you suppose led that to happen?
>
> Have you sometimes gotten ideas from television which you latter found out were false?
> Why do you suppose that happened?
> How do you try to keep yourself from making such a mistake and believing a false idea shown on television?
>
> What do you think is the most true-to-life program you have seen on TV?
> What about it is realistic?
> Why do you feel it is realistic?

> Suppose a child asked how he or she could tell when something on television was true and when it wasn't. What would you say? Could you give any rules that would help the child...?

Answers to these questions and other similar ones include statements like the ones I quoted at the beginning of the paper and many others which I will relate in a few minutes.

Toward the end of the interview we ask about the person's knowledge of the television industry, their interaction with others about television content, and their awareness of stereotyped television portrayals of sex-roles, race-roles, and styles of interpersonal interaction. Let me give you two examples of the extent to which people seem to understand the television industry when we question them about it. The first comes from a thirteen-year-old black girl. She felt that entertainment programs were put on the air "to entertain" and that money played a big role in television because "actors want more cash. everybody wants more cash, if they don't get the cash they quit." When we asked her whether the fact that actors wanted money affected the reality of a program, she replied "Um, yeah, yeah, yeah, I do, I do." Then she explained "...like on Hawaii Five O or Police Story and there is a syndicate, and they argue a bit, and they really, you know they are really getting cash and all that, they want to get cut in for more, and I want you to murder somebody for a lousy two grand or something like that. They want more money."

An adult male, on the other hand, told us that certain programs were broadcast because:

> "They're looking for the most viewers. So they're going to put them on in the times when they think the most people are watching, so they can sell their products. Even Channel 2 [the PBS station in Boston] they aren't selling products, they're still going to gear their programs to the times when the most people they think are interested are watching.

The disparity between his view of the television industry and the thirteen-year-olds is apparent. What is not apparent from what I have said is that this man is the most knowledgeable person we have interviewed. Most adults do not have a very complete understanding of why entertainment programs are produced and broadcast.

We have assessed the time-to-time reliability of the interview with three people and found that the information given at a second interview was almost the same as that given at the first. The interview itself was somewhat shorter and the absolute amount of relevant information somewhat less, but the pattern of responses was not very different. We have also assessed validity by examining the face validity of the interview and the responses to it, by comparing the responses of adolescents and adults, and by comparing the responses of graduate students considered to be more and less knowledgeable about television production and the industry itself. In all three cases we found that the interview provided information relevant to our goals and that it discriminated between people who we felt on an a priori basis should respond differently. Thus we are reasonably comfortable with the clinical interview format, although we have built into our study additional, more experimental validity checks on the information we have obtained.

Interview transcripts are coded in two ways. In one estimates of how much of entertainment programming is true-to-life or worth knowing, knowledge of the television industry, interaction with others about television, estimates of stereotyping on television, opinions about the effects of television on others, and general evaluations of television content are coded. Another coding provides the information which we are most interested in. This coding focusses on all

statements which reflect how people decide what they would believe and/or remember about what they saw on television and the parts of a program they select in making these decisions. After testing out many systems and examining the information obtained from each one and the intercoder reliability possible with it, we have arrived at one which divides information into five main categories which will be presented later in the paper.

Intercoder reliability on this system has been assessed frequently over the last few months. We have found it possible to achieve very high reliability in some instances, but we have not been able to maintain consistently high reliability. Our reliability figures fall into three areas: (1) For whether or not to code a sentence, agreement has ranged from 71% to 91%, (2) For all codable sentences, agreement has ranged from 26% to 68%, and (3) For coding category assigned to any statement both coders agreed was codable, agreement has ranged from 45% to 93%. Because of the variability in our reliability figures, we currently have each interview coded independently by two different people who then meet to resolve their disagreements. This process then yields the data which we will finally analyze.

Data analysis has so far been quite preliminary, although we will soon do a computer analysis which will let us look at the impact of various background variables on the way in which the subjects evaluate television content. We will also be able to understand better the ways in which the subjects think about the topic of applicability and to relate the structure of the interview to the actual content presented.

The preliminary analysis includes sixteen interviews, evenly divided by black and white, male and female, and thirteen-year-olds and adults.

Needless to say this is just a glance at the kinds of information we may encounter in the full sample. We have focussed now on differences in the ways in which thirteen-year-olds and adults evaluate television.

In general, adults talk more during the interview than do adolescents. This holds true whether one compares the number of pages in the interview (adults, 8.25 pages; adolescents, 7.5 pages), or the number of sentences in the interview (adults, 173.6 sentences; adolescents, 151.9 sentences), or the number of sentences specifically related to the issue of applicability eliminating sentences referring to background information (adults, 137.4 sentences; adolescents, 112.4 sentences). While these adults are more talkative than the thirteen-year-olds there is no significant difference in the number of codable sentences for each group. On the other hand, the thirteen-year-old group produce twice as many ambiguous sentences, or sentences that cannot be coded into a category, than do adults (adolescents, 3.7% ambiguous sentences; adults, 1.9% ambiguous sentences).

Our next coding step has been to look at statements which reflect decisions about what is true-to-life or worth knowing on television and statements which reflect the processes by which these decisions are made. We found that people rarely relied on their affective responses to program content or on an overall evaluation of the credibility of television programming in deciding what is true-to-life or worth knowing on television. Instead, about half the time they relied on cues contained within a program such as who the actors are, quality of acting, the type of program, specific programs, sets, costumes, plot line, individual actions, and production techniques. The other half of the time they explicitly compared program content to information sources outside the program such as their own knowledge of programs, television

personalities, and the television industry and reference to their own experience, conceivable experience, and information given by recognized authorities. Let me give you a few examples of these two major areas:

> One sixteen-year-old girl told us that doctor shows are "interesting because I know that the terms that they use and the things that they say are all true, you know, they check with doctors first. And I always get a lot of interesting facts from shows like that, you know, things that are true and stuff."
> She apparently uses program type as a guide to truth, as well as her understanding that scripts are checked by doctors prior to broadcasting.

> A thirteen-year-old boy told us that Family Affair was the most realistic program on television. When asked to explain what made it realistic he answered "see it has an apartment, it has the kids and their friends and everything going to school and then the playground and everything."
> He apparently uses the characters, their activities, and the setting to help him decide what is realistic.

It can be argued that both these adolescents are actually relating television content to their own experiences and knowledge outside of television, but there is very little evidence for it in their statements. At other times adolescents and adults are more explicit in making these relationships. For example, one thirteen-year-old boy us how he decided when something was true-to-life:

> Well, if it is then it's something that's typically family life, or something my family probably would do, or somethin' I would do or my sisters or brothers.

Adults and thirteen-year-olds determine applicability using cues within a program in a similar way and to a similar extent. While adolescents use cues within a program 54.7% of the time adults use these same type of cues 50.7%. The specific cues that are employed by both age groups are very similar with one exception: 13-year-olds rely on production techniques like flashbacks, slow motion, and zooms 3.8% of the time while adults use them only 1% of the time. Let me give you an example of this by quoting the advice a thirteen-year-old boy would give

to a younger child:

> I'd tell them to look for, first to look for the phony stuff, right. The shots. Because in the movies and acting and real life they don't always shoot the person. I'd tell him to keep his eye open for that. And I'd tell him to watch for like cords cause you can tell in that McDonald's commercial. I know that's fake, I can see the cord picks him up. I'd tell him to keep his eye open for anything that may be hooked on to the person, make him fly. Like in Superman, what he is is like laying down or something and probably the scenery going backwards. He's like this wheel going around in circles cause it's the same thing.

Except for production techniques, the two age groups utilize the remaining cues within the program in a very similar way.

When we look at the comparison processes that subjects use we focus on the explicit relationships the subject makes between what goes on in a program and what the subject knows from sources other than the program. Comparison processes represent 47.5% of all codable statements for adults while they represent 41% of codable statements for thirteen-year-olds. The most significant difference between the two age groups is their use of comparison processes in the area of Industry Knowledge. This category includes all statements which refer to knowledge about the commercial nature and audience size orientation of the industry as a basis for deciding true-to-life or worth knowing. Let me give you one example:

> And I think any program is always giving the opinion of the person who either wrote it or produced it. So if this person goes into a country to do a documentary on it, and he really loves that country, he's going to do a very good job gearing it to that country. Where again somebody's sent in there who doesn't want to do it but there's a buck in it for him, he'll throw anything into it and send it back and you watch it. The opinion we get out of it is the opinion of the person who produced it.

Nearly 13% of adults' codable statements refer to industry knowledge while only 3.0% of thirteen-year-olds' codable statements referred to industry knowledge. This finding is interesting because it suggests that one of the

things children could be taught more about in our later work is the way in which television as an industry operates.

Finally we compared the way in which adults and adolescents associated comparison processes with specific cues within a program. It seems that adults use comparison processes in a more general way. For example, adults were likely to say such things as:

> Well, the only way I can decide that is from my own knowledge and what I know and how I live.
>
> Well, I think if you know that it could happen you think it's true-to-life.
>
> Usually from my own experiences.

Thirteen-year-olds, on the other hand, are more likely to tie the comparison process to a specific aspect of the program when trying to decide what is true-to-life and worth knowing. For example, thirteen-year-olds were likely to say:

> Like I don't think they could ever make a man [Six million dollar man] with that much power.
>
> Well, on [The Odd Couple] there's a guy who's really messy and everything, I don't know, but there could be a person who does that but I really doubt it.
>
> When it's realistic, like if you seen something happen in real life, like somebody ripped off something in a store. And then you see that on TV, you know like -- you're picturing yourself back on the spot that you saw somebody stealing something and the guy yelling at somebody.

In the preliminary sample comparison between adults and thirteen-year-olds we see differences: (a) in the amount of talking in the interview; (b) in the number of ambiguous statements included; (c) in the use of industry knowledge as an applicability cue; and (d) in the association of specific parts of a program to comparison processes. These variations seem to reflect expected developmental differences between adults and adolescents. They generally reflect a greater range of ex-

perience on the part of adults than on the part of the thirteen-year-old group. We expect that our work with younger children will follow a similar pattern, with young children relying on more specific cues from a program.

This preliminary data analysis is our first effort at understanding the various ways in which people decide what they will believe and/or remember from entertainment programs. When we have completed our sample of 72 people and a fuller computer analysis of what they say, we will be better able to understand how the issue of applicability is dealt with by thirteen-year-old, sixteen-year-old, and adult, black, white, and Puerto Rican, males and females.

In the next two and a half years we will try to understand how four-, eight-, and twelve-year-olds deal with this same issue, to teach them techniques which seem to be within their grasp and yet more effective than the ones they currently use, and to help their parents to teach them. If we have been successful in identifying the skills that are really critical to evaluating entertainment programming and in finding ways to communicate these to children, then these children will be more critical consumers of television content. If so, we will have helped them to deal more effectively with their world.